

Flemish film policy and the representation of a nation

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“till the public sphere do us part”... Critical reflections on representation, identity constructions and communication flows in Belgium

Closing seminar International Francqui Professor Jostein Grisprud

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Venue: VUB/IBBT/SMIT, Pleinlaan 9, first floor

14.00 - 15.30 : Panel “Representing the nation: Belgian cinema and the politics of identity”

Daniel Biltereyst (Ghent University, CIMS), “Nation, identity and Belgian cinema: introduction and reflections”

Anne Roekens (University of Namur, Département Histoire, FUNDP) “Belgian cinema history as an identitary discourse”

Gertjan Willems (Ghent University, CIMS), “Flemish film policy and the representation of a nation”

Wouter Hessels (Erasmus Hogeschool Brussels), “André Delvaux, Belgian cinema and identity”

1 Introduction

The question of identity and representation in general, and especially within a Belgian context, is a very difficult question to tackle. This panel wants to contribute to this complex discussion by focusing on cinema. Within the larger discussion on the relation between Belgian cinema and the representation of the nation, I want to examine the role and the position of the state within this discussion. The role of the state, by means of its film policy.

Hereby, I will focus on the film policy in Flanders, which is of course a particularly interesting case when it comes to a concept like nationhood.

2 Heritage film

As the time of this presentation is limited, I've chosen to focus on the heritage film. This is not to say that no other kind of films can be linked to the 'national question' – quite the contrary is true –, but this is simply the type of cinema that has most often been explicitly linked to this 'national question'. Although there's mostly a certain level of ambivalence present, heritage films are usually criticized for inviting a nostalgic gaze and offering "settled and visually splendid manifestations of an essentially pastoral national identity and authentic culture" (Higson, 2006: 93).

Besides this, there are some other good reasons to focus on the heritage genre.

Although only 16 of the 85 Flemish films released in the 1970s and 1980s can be classified as heritage films¹, and although they were often disparagingly called 'peasant's films', it was the most prominent and popular film genre in Flanders. Moreover, these heritage films were also the most prestigious films produced. These factors together led to a widespread conception that the Flemish film tradition from the 1970s and the 1980s was pervaded by Flemish heritage films, all of them, except for one, based upon a classic work from the Flemish literary patrimony.

Following this, many filmmakers, but also critics, have stated, often somewhat over-simplified, that when a filmmaker wanted to be sure to get support, he or she just had to adapt a Flemish literary classic.

For the construction of a shared cultural and national memory, the importance of literature can hardly be overestimated. With his concept of 'print capitalism', Benedict Anderson has pointed out how literature and newspapers contribute to the construction of a nation, or, as Anderson puts it, an 'imagined community'.

By adapting classic works, films help to construct and consolidate both the literary and the cinematic patrimony of Flanders. Already in the late 1940s, the famous French film critic André Bazin stated that one of the functions of adaptation is "the creation of national or cultural mythology".

For all these reasons, the heritage film is particularly interesting to examine the relation between film policy and the national question.

¹ To determine which films were considered as heritage, and which ones not, we took into account whether the film had a clear place for the heritage and patrimony in its text, or if an adaptation belonged to the established Flemish literary patrimony.

3 Methodology

In my attempt to do this, I have relied in the first place on archival material from the Flemish government. This means that we should be clearly aware that these documents have been created by the film policy staff themselves. The archive material mainly consisted of subsidy dossiers of all supported films and the minutes of the meetings of the film commission.

Here you see an example from such a report of the film commission, from 1975 and from 1976.

A bit more information about this film commission is necessary here, to provide a larger framework. The film commission was established in 1964 by the Royal Decree ‘for the promotion of the Dutch-language film culture’. Under this system, filmmakers could apply for a grant to the film commission, who subsequently advised the competent minister. But, this advice was non-binding and the final support decision was always taken by the minister. This system existed until 2002, when the much more politically independent Flanders Audiovisual Fund (the VAF) became operative.

4 Flemish film policy and heritage cinema

Now, let’s take a look at the concrete film production policy. The before mentioned Royal Decree of 1964 was an initiative of the pro-Flemish Christian democratic minister of culture Renaat Van Elslande, and it was a manifestation of the Flemish cultural emancipation of that time. The film policy during the 1960s and 1970s was pursued in the same spirit, and in many statements throughout the commission meeting minutes, a strong pro-Flemish attitude, can be noticed.

The Royal Decree speaks about the “Dutch-language film culture”. The politically appointed film commission clearly had a rather narrow conception of this ‘culture’ as being high culture.

In line with this, several commission members saw the adaptation of literary classics as a highly cultural practice true to the perceived spirit of the Royal Decree. And, what is more, the support for adaptations of Flemish classics seemed to fit well in their ideological pro-Flemish background.

So when in 1970 the first real heritage project, ‘Mira’, applied for a grant, the commission was quite enthusiastic about an adaptation of a work by the Flemish pastoral writer Stijn Streuvels. This film became an enormous popular success, which caused several other Mira-like projects to be put in the pipeline.

However, the commission turned several of these projects down. Take for example 'The Conscript', a film based upon the novel of the same name by Hendrik Conscience, the most prominent literary figure of the Flemish movement. When this film was proposed to the commission, they warned that, and I quote, "the Mira-line should not be continued, in spite of certain positive aspects and popular approval".

It turns out that certain members of the commission were heavily worried that these films would become what they called "too folkloristic". In a later report, the commission found to its regret that, and I quote again "our filmmakers are more concerned with the social reality of the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, than with the present social reality." Also, the commission expressed on several occasions a strong preference for original scripts that focus on contemporary society.

Many such concerns were being made, and it proves that it would be unjust to label the commission as an outright supporter of classic literary adaptations because of its pro-Flemish background. The pro-Flemish attitude of the commission was thus not directly translated in a strong preference for heritage films. Quite the contrary, these films caused a lot of ambiguity among the film policy actors.

Nevertheless, heritage films kept on taking large parts of the film budget. This had several causes, but for one thing, the commission did not internally agree on the folkloristic critique. Some of the more dominant voices within the film commission were consistently in favor of heritage films. Beside this, the commission also saw that the heritage films were highly popular, not unimportant to justify the choices of a cultural policy.

Another factor that could play in the advantage of heritage films was the ultimate power of the minister of culture. For example, when 'The Lion of Flanders', a film and television series full of Flemish mythology, applied for a grant, the commission gave a negative advice. But the minister decided to support the project anyway, for an amount of almost the quarter of that year's film budget.

Another factor that advantaged the support for heritage films, was the active lobbying of production companies. Especially Kunst & Kino is worth mentioning here. Kunst & Kino, being the most professional production company at that time, succeeded in imposing their will through the producer's persuasiveness and diplomatic strategies.

Whenever the film commission had a negative attitude against a project of Kunst & Kino, the filmmakers promised to meet their wishes. This was for example the case for the film 'Flaxfield', based upon a

pastoral novel by again Stijn Streuvels. After the release of this film, the commission stated that, and I quote, “the initial fear about Flaxfield has not been taken away by the final outcome, this film is part of the package of traditional Flemish heimat films”.

4.1 The liberal 1980s

In the 1980s, liberal ministers took the place of the previous Christian democratic ministers of culture. This shift on a political level precipitated the lessening of the elitist view on ‘culture’ as high culture. The newly appointed film commission made a plea for the truly popular film, which resulted in several popular comedies during the 1980s.

The hard pro-Flemish line was also loosened, but at the same time, the Flemish heritage films were not forgotten, quite contrary. The new commission even took on a much more straightforward pro-heritage attitude than the older commission. An illustrative case for the difference between the old and the new commission, are ‘A Peasant’s Psalm’ and ‘Van Paemel Family’..

Already in 1970, a ‘Van Paemel Family’-project was submitted for the first time, but the commission turned it down, because they found the source text, a 1903 play by Cyriel Buysse, inappropriate to adapt. Eleven years later, a project based on the same source text was submitted again, but the film commission was still not convinced. However, with the establishment of the new film commission, a great interest in the same project was immediately expressed. This project even received an extra helping hand from minister of culture Patrick Dewael, who formulated, and I quote, “his willingness to support this project from our own soil with supplementary grants”.

‘A Peasant’s Psalm’, based on the 1935 novel of the same name by Felix Timmermans, forms a similar case. When in 1967 the adaptation of this book was proposed, the commission judged that, and I quote “such literary work is not any longer a topical subject”. Apparently, twenty years later, this work had become topical, as the new commission gave it immediately a positive advice, without any further discussion.

This highly positive attitude towards heritage films during the 1980s is striking. Practically all such projects almost immediately received support. However, only few of them actually got actually produced. This was mostly due to financial problems, as the liberal ministers reduced the government support per film, because they found that more private investors had to be sought.

5 Discussion

Summarizing, I'd like to stress the evolution in the film policy discourse of which I just gave a brief outline.

During the 1960s and the 1970s, the mainly Christian democratic film policy actors clearly adopted a strong pro-Flemish attitude, inspired by the Flemish cultural emancipation. However, this attitude was not directly translated in a strong preference for heritage films. Quite the contrary, these films caused a lot of ambiguity among the film policy actors.

During the 1980s, when the liberals were the dominant film policy actors, the hard pro-Flemish line was loosened and became rather latent, but the attitude towards heritage films became clearly positive.

This may perhaps seem somewhat surprising, but in the end, it's just another proof of the complexity of the whole discussion on nationalism and nation-building.

6 References

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